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THE PROBLEM OF UNSECTARIAN MORAL INSTRUCTION.*

It will be the object of the present course of lectures to give in outline the subject-matter of moral instruction for children of the school age, and to discuss the methods by which this kind of instruction should be imparted. At the outset, however, we are confronted by what certainly is a grave, and what seems to many an insuperable, difficulty. It is the firm conviction of many serious persons that morality depends on religious sanction, and that rules of right conduct can be taught neither to adults nor to the young, except in the name and under the authority of some religious belief. To such persons the very name of unsectarian or independent morality seems to savor of infidelity. It seems to them that the attempt to accomplish, without the aid of religion, what has always been regarded as the most precious prerogative and the most valuable service of religion to mankind, is tantamount to an attack on religion, and argues a deliberate design to depose it from the position of pre-eminence which it has heretofore occupied. The friends of unsectarian morality are chargeable with no such secret machinations; they are not necessarily either irreligious or anti-religious. In fact, as will appear later on, the principle of unsectarian moral teaching may be made to rest on purely educational grounds, with which the religious bias of the educator has nothing whatever to do. But there are also grounds of expediency, which in the United States compel us to face the problem of unsectarian moral education, and to these let us first devote attention. Admit *argumenti causa* the justice of the proposition that moral truths must be taught in the name of some form of religious

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belief, the question at once arises, To which form of religious belief shall we give the preference? I am speaking now of the public schools of the United States. The public schools are supported out of the general fund of taxation, to which all the citizens are compelled alike to contribute. It will clearly be an act of gross injustice to compel a citizen of one denomination to pay for instilling the doctrine of another denomination into the minds of the young, in other words, to support and assist in spreading religious ideas in which he does not believe. This would be doing violence to the rights of private conscience, and the act of injustice would become simply monstrous if a parent were compelled to aid in instilling religious opinions, to him repugnant, into the minds of his children. There is no state religion in the United States. All shades of belief and of disbelief are on a par. There are in this country Jews, Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Christians of other names. They are alike citizens. They contribute alike to the maintenance of the public system of education. With what show of fairness, then, can the belief of any one of these churches be adopted by the state for the purpose of inculcating moral truths into the minds of the pupils? The case seems, on the face of it, a hopeless one. But the following devices have been suggested to remove, or rather circumvent, the difficulty.

The first device is, that representatives of the various theistic churches (including Catholics, Protestants, and Jews) shall meet in concert, agree to eliminate all the differences by which they are divided, and formulate a common platform, containing only such articles of belief as they can agree upon. This platform would include, for example, the belief in the Deity, the belief in the immortality of the soul, and the belief in future reward and punishment; and upon it as a foundation the edifice of moral instruction might then be erected. There are, however, two obvious objections to this proposal. In the first place, this *Dreibund* of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism would leave out of account entirely the party of the agnostics, whose views may be indeed erroneous, who may be the objects, in turn, of compassion and detestation, but whose

rights as citizens must, nevertheless, be respected. *Neminem læde*—"hurt no one"—is a cardinal rule of justice, and should be observed by the friends of religion in their dealings with their opponents as well as with one another. The agnostic party has attained considerable proportions in this country; but if it had not, if there were only a single citizen who held its opinions, it would still be inexcusable on the part of the majority to attempt to trample on his rights. In respect to political differences, the majority rules, and must rule; in respect to religious differences, the smallest minority possesses rights on which even an overwhelming majority, arrayed on the other side, cannot afford to trespass. It is one of the most noted achievements of the American commonwealths, that they have so clearly and distinctly separated between the domain of religion and of politics,—in the one case adopting the maxim of coercion, in the other case allowing the full measure of individual liberty.

But the second objection is even more cogent. It is proposed to eliminate the differences which divide the various churches, and to formulate their points of agreement. But the life of a religion is usually to be found precisely in those points in which it differs from its neighbor, and an abstract shadowy scheme of religious belief, such as has been sketched, would, in truth, satisfy no one. Out of respect to the sentiments of the Jews, it is proposed to omit the doctrines of the divine Saviour and of the Atonement. Again, out of respect to the Protestants, it is proposed to omit the distinctive Roman Catholic doctrines, such as the efficacy of prayer to the Virgin and the saints. But to eliminate the distinctive doctrines of the different sects would be to eliminate what many regard as the most essential part of their faith, and consequently the part they hold to be particularly important as a basis for the proper moral instruction of the young. When one affirms his desire to base the moral teaching of the young on religious belief, does he not bear in mind, above all and before all, those religious beliefs which are to him dearer than any other, in which the life-blood of his faith pulsates? This first device, therefore, is to be rejected. It implies a gross

injustice to the agnostics, and it will never content the really religious minds of any denomination. It will be acceptable only to the class of so-called rationalists or theists pure and simple, whose creed is practically limited to the three articles mentioned : the belief in Deity, immortality, and future punishment and reward. But this class constitutes a comparatively small portion of the community, and they have no right, under the specious plea of reconciling the various creeds, in effect, to force their own creed upon the rest of the community.

The second device seems to promise better results ; it provides that religious and moral instruction combined shall be given in the public schools by clergymen of the several denominations, or, at any rate, by persons appointed by the church authorities. The pupils, divided into Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, are assembled in separate class-rooms. The high authority of Germany is invoked in favor of that system. The president of a leading American university has spoken in its favor. It is likely that an attempt will be made to introduce it in this country. Already in some of our public institutions, reformatory schools, for example, religious services are held by the ministers of the various sects for the benefit of those inmates of the institution who belong to their sect, and we may expect that an analogous arrangement will be proposed for the common schools. It will be necessary, therefore, to pay some attention to the German system, and to explain the reasons which have induced or compelled the German government to adopt the compromise above referred to.

In Germany, church and state are united. The King of Prussia is the head of the Evangelical Church. This constitutes a vital difference between America and Germany. Secondly, in Germany the schools existed before the state took charge of them. The school system was founded by the church, and, for instance, in Prussia, the problem was how to convert church schools into state schools. The attempt was made to do this by limiting the influence of the clergy to certain branches and certain hours of instruction, and securing the supremacy of the state in respect to all other branches

and all other hours. In America, the state founded the schools *ab initio*. In Germany, the state has encroached upon the church, has entered church schools, and reconstructed them in its own interest. In this country the church is trying to encroach upon the state, is seeking to enter into state schools, and subordinate them to its own purposes. The example of Germany cannot, therefore, be quoted as a precedent in point. The system of compromise in Germany marks an advance in the direction of increasing state influence. Its adoption in this country would make a retrograde movement in increasing church influence.

Nor is the system, when considered on its own merits, a happy one. Professor Gneist, in his valuable treatise "*Die Konfessionelle Schule*" (to which I refer those who desire to inform themselves on the historical evolution of the Prussian system), maintains that scientific instruction must be unsectarian, and that religious instruction must be sectarian. I agree to both propositions. But to my mind it follows that, if religious instruction must be sectarian, it ought to have no place in state schools, at least in a country where the separation of church and state is complete. Moreover, the kind of religious instruction provided for in the Prussian scheme can never satisfy the earnest sectarian. He demands, and, by the logic of his faith, he is compelled to demand, that the religious influence should permeate the entire school. The Catholic, for example, demands that history be taught from the Catholic point of view; that reading-books be filled with Catholic legends; that the science-teaching be subordinated, and, if you like, mutilated to fit requirements of Catholic doctrine. Of what avail is it to allow the Catholic priest to come in twice or three times a week and teach the catechism to the Catholic pupils, if the rest of the instruction given in the school is wholly beyond his control, and informed by a spirit alien to his own? This kind of compromise can never be heartily endorsed. It may be accepted under pressure, but will always be submitted to under protest.

The third arrangement suggested is, that each sect should build its own schools, and draw upon the fund supplied by

taxation according to the number of children which it educates. This seems just, but is not really so. Take the case of the Catholic population in New York; there are, perhaps, 100,000 children of the school age. It would follow that the Catholic parochial school would receive from the public treasury an amount sufficient for teaching 100,000 pupils. The state might prescribe certain rules and set up certain standards to which the school must conform; it might also send its inspectors into the schools and thus attempt to secure obedience. But there are two objections to this system. In the first place, it is the experience of history that in sectarian schools religious interest is accentuated and secular knowledge comparatively neglected. As an instance of this, the provision of the school regulations at Kur-Hessen after 1848 required that twenty hours weekly be devoted to religious teaching in the public schools. And the power of sects and their influence, direct and indirect, is such, that the state inspectors would be helpless in the face of their opposition. The rules and regulations laid down by the state would simply not be enforced.

In the second place, the purpose for which the public school exists would be defeated. The sectarian schools tend to separate the members of one denomination from those of others, to prevent the growth of that national unit which it is the very business of the public school to create and foster. State support of public education is justified as a measure dictated by the instinct of self-preservation on the part of the state, and this is especially true in a republic. In a monarchy, the strong arm of a reigning dynasty, supported by the ruling class, may keep the discordant elements of the state together by force, as to some extent we can see in Austria to-day. In a republic the spirit of unity among the people alone can keep them one people. This spirit is fostered in those schools in which children of all classes and sects are assembled, and in which they are indoctrinated into the history, traditions, and aspirations of the nation.

We return to our problem. If sectarian schools are impracticable, then there is clearly no way remaining by which a

morality based on religious belief can be taught. The only alternative would be to leave morality out of the scheme of instruction altogether, and this alternative has actually been adopted. A slight pretence is indeed made to inculcate religion by means of the morning exercises in the public schools. But this is so inefficacious as to be unworthy of being seriously taken into account. The Protestant Bible in the schools is equivalent to raising the Protestant flag above the schools. It is simply a demonstration, nothing more. But the teaching of morals ought not to be left out of the curriculum. How can we leave out the most important branch of instruction? How very important it is, will be, I trust, apparent in the course of these lectures. I may be permitted to take it for granted at present.

How, then, can we impart moral instruction in such a way as to satisfy all parties, in such a way as not to give offence to any religious belief, or any religious believer, nor to do violence to the rights of the agnostic, or of any sect or of any party whatever? The correct answer to this question will be the solution of the problem of unsectarian moral education. I can merely announce my answer to-day; the entire remainder of the course before us must substantiate it.

The answer is this: It is the business of the moral instructor in the school to deliver to his pupil the subject-matter of morality, but not to deal with the sanctions of it; to give his pupils a clear understanding of what is right and what is wrong, but not to enter into the question why the right should be done and the wrong avoided. Let us suppose that the teacher is dealing with veracity. He says to his pupil: Thou shalt not lie. He takes it for granted that the pupil feels the force of this commandment, and ought to yield obedience to it. A young child that should ask me, Why ought I not to lie? I should suspect of quibbling and dishonest intentions. I would hold up to the child the *ought* in all its awful majesty. The right to reason about these matters cannot be considered until after the mind has attained a certain maturity. And, as a matter of fact, every good child agrees with me unhesitatingly when I say, It is wrong to lie. There is an answer-

ing echo in its heart that confirms my words. But what, then, is my business as a moral instructor? In the first place, to deepen the impression of the wrongfulness of a lie and the sacredness of truth, by the very solemnity with which I speak the words, by the spirit in which I approach the subject. My first business is to convey the spirit of moral reverence to my pupils. In the next place, I ought to quicken the pupils' perceptions as to what is right and wrong; in this case, as to what is a lie and what is not. I enumerate the different species of lies: the direct lie, the lie of equivocation, the lie of partial statements, the lie which is conveyed without the use of language, through silence and by mien and gesture. In other words, I ought to make my pupils see that whenever they intentionally convey a false impression, they are lying. I ought to make their conscience sensitive on this point, so that they may avoid those numerous ambiguities of which children are so fond, and which are practised even by many adults. I ought to invigorate the moral nature of my pupils with respect to truthfulness. In the next place, I ought to point out to them the most frequent motives which lead to lying, so that by being on their guard against the cause, they may escape the evil effect. Cowardice, for example, is one cause of lying; by making the pupil ashamed of cowardice we can often cure him of the tendency to falsehood. An unpruned imagination is another cause of lying, envy is another cause, so, too, is selfishness in all its forms. Direct the pupil's attention to the various evil tendencies in his nature which tempt him into the ways of falsehood.

Again, finally, I ought to explain to my pupils the consequences of falsehood: the loss of the confidence of our fellow-men, which is the immediate and palpable result of being detected in a falsehood, the general loosening of the bonds of mutual trust in society at large, the loss of self-respect on the part of the liar, the fatal necessity of multiplying lies and of inventing new falsehoods to make good the first. A vast amount of good can be done in this way in stimulating the moral faculty, enabling the pupil to discriminate the finer shades of right and wrong, helping him to trace temptation to its sources,

and erecting in his mind barriers against evil-doing formed of a realizing sense of the consequences of evil-doing.

The same general method may be followed with respect to all the other chief heads of practical morality. The conscience can be enlightened, strengthened, and always without once raising the question why it is wrong to tell a lie. That it is wrong should rather, as I have said, be assumed. The ultimate sources of moral obligation need never be discussed at all. *It is the business of religion and philosophy to make affirmations with respect to these ultimate sources and sanctions. Religion says : We ought to do right because it is the will of God that we should, or for the love of Christ. Philosophy says : We should do right for utilitarian reasons or transcendental reasons, or in obedience to the law of evolution, or what not. The moral teacher, fortunately, is not called upon to choose between these various metaphysical or theological asseverations. He may subscribe to the one or the other of them individually ; but as a teacher he is to remain within the safe limits of his own proper province. He is not to explain why we should do the right, but to make the young, who are intrusted to his charge, see more clearly what is right, and instil into them his own love and respect for the right. There is a great body of moral truth upon which all good men, of whatever sect or opinion, are agreed. It is the business of the public schools to deliver to their pupils this body of moral truths,—but, I must beg you carefully to note,—to deliver it, not in the style of a preacher, but according to the methods of the pedagogue ; that is, in a systematic way, moral lessons being graded to suit the varying ages and capacities of the pupils, and the illustrative material being selected and arranged accordingly. Conceive that the modern educational methods have been applied to the stock of moral truths accepted by all good men, and you will have the material for the moral lessons which a public school ought to supply.

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